

Bottlenecks in conserving mangroves associated with the Puttalam Estuary, with special reference to the Seguwantivu Conservation Forest

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Abstract

Puttalam district records one of the highest concentrations of mangroves in Sri Lanka that is vital for providing a multitude of ecosystem services including livelihoods, food security and coastal defense. As a mitigation measure to curtail their rapid destruction from the prawn farming industry, 1039.5 ha of mangrove area were gazetted as Conservation Forests (CF) under the Forest Conservation Ordinance (FCO) in 2000 and 2002 period. Of the nine CFs, five are associated with the Puttalam estuary proper while four are located adjacent to the Mundal Lake. 385.37 ha Seguwantivu is the largest of the CFs and is placed within the Mi Oya river delta.

Although the e CFs can be considered as “No-take zones” where all extractive uses are prohibited, as protected areas that remain in isolation, surrounded by radically altered habitat, are facing serious viability problems. Unavailability of an integrated conservation and management plan with proper ownership for the Estuarine ecosystem is the main bottleneck obstructing the mangrove forest survival and the sustainable utilization of estuarine resources. It has been found that over 60% of the existing prawn farms are un-authorized and majority is presently being converted in to saltpans due to low risk and high economic returns of the slat industry. Analysis of forest offenses related to mangroves indicates that considerable area in Seguwantivu has been cleared for expansion of saltpans. Land ownership issue is a major impediment in implementing legislative provisions for protecting the forests. Therefore, it is vital to clearly demarcate CF boundaries and to undertake biological and socio-economic assessments, before preparing management plans as mandated in the FCO. Further haphazardly developed policies by government institutions for tourism, energy, fishery, forestry and wildlife as well as coast conservation need to be mainstreamed and re-assessed to address conservation issues as well as the present and future needs of an expanding population depending on the estuarine resources.

Keywords

Puttalam district, conservation forest, management, policy